

(No Agenda issued.)

C A B I N E T 43 (39).

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held
on SATURDAY, 26th AUGUST, 1939, at 6.30 p.m.

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THE INTER-
NATIONAL
SITUATION.

Danzig and
Germany.

(Previous
Reference:
Cabinet
42 (39)
Conclusion
1).

1. THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Cabinet would have seen the telegrams from Sir Nevile Henderson (Nos. 458, 459, and 461 from Berlin) reporting the interview which he had had with Herr Hitler. He had thought it right that the whole Cabinet should share the opportunity which he and the Foreign Secretary had had, of discussing the whole position with Sir Nevile Henderson.

After discussion with the Ambassador, the conclusion had been reached that it would be undesirable that we should send an answer to Herr Hitler that afternoon, since this might create the impression that we could be rushed. It would be right that we should take time to consider our reply. Before leaving Berlin Sir Nevile had sent a note to Herr von Ribbentrop, to the effect that discussion of the matter might take some time and that it was by no means certain that he would be able to return that night. He had now sent a message to the effect that the matter was being very carefully considered and that he hoped to return to Berlin some time tomorrow afternoon. The Prime Minister said that he proposed later in the Meeting to hand round to the Cabinet a draft reply. He did not, however, suggest that the Cabinet should reach any final decision on the draft that evening, but that they should meet again in the morning to consider the matter finally before the Ambassador left for Berlin in the afternoon.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that he felt sure that Sir Nevile Henderson would be willing to answer any questions which members of the Cabinet wished to put to him. In form, Herr Hitler's

letter showed the not unfamiliar technique. It was clearly one purpose of the letter to divide us if possible from the French and the Poles, and to try to make us realise that, in the new situation created by the Russo-German Pact, Poland's friends could do nothing to help her, and should therefore make no attempt to do so.

He thought that two conflicting desires were expressed in Herr Hitler's letter. The first was his keen desire to settle the Polish question. The second, his desire to avoid a quarrel with the British Empire. He referred more than once to the position as it would exist when the Polish question had been settled, but he was careful not to say what kind of settlement he had in mind. The Foreign Secretary thought that, on this matter, there was some conflict between the written message and what Herr Hitler had said in conversation, which might be evidence that he had not quite made up his mind what form of settlement he was prepared to accept. The ultimate question was, of course, whether he wanted a settlement with Poland on his own terms more than he wanted to avoid war with Great Britain. He (the Foreign Secretary) felt no confidence as to the answer to this question.

In the course of the day, fairly precise information, from sources alleged to be reliable, had reached us to the effect that Germany intended to march into Poland that night, or, according to later reports, the next morning. Every member of the Cabinet could form as good a judgment as he could as to whether this was likely to happen. He himself thought, however,

that for the German Government to arrange for our Ambassador in Berlin to fly to this country with a special message in a German aeroplane was not consistent with such an intention. Even if the matter was viewed in the most sinister light, and the object of Herr Hitler's letter was to get another peace offer on record, there was no point in making such an offer and not affording time for a reply. It might well be that the object in causing these reports to be circulated was to influence the substance of our reply, and to dispose us to concede what Herr Hitler wanted.

Continuing, the Foreign Secretary referred to a message which he had received the previous night from a neutral person in touch with Field Marshal Goering, to the effect that our action of that day in signing the Anglo-Polish Treaty was a dreadful action and was likely to precipitate a crisis.

The Foreign Secretary said, in passing, that it had been suggested to him that he should find an excuse for postponing signature. He had felt that to do so would be to excite suspicion among our friends, and to make the Germans feel that we were likely to give way to pressure.

The Foreign Secretary said that other information was that the signature of the Polish Treaty had produced a considerable effect in Berlin, as showing our determination. Perhaps, on a broad view, the effect of the signature of the Treaty at this juncture did not count much either way.

The Foreign Secretary said that the same neutral person had asked him to send a message to Field Marshal Goering. A suitable message had been prepared and despatched and the neutral person had expressed himself as much gratified.

The Foreign Secretary said that he had given a good deal of thought to the general line of the reply to the German Chancellor. It would be necessary, he thought, on the one hand to acknowledge the spirit in which the appeal was made and to say that we were anxious to see a peaceful settlement; and on the other hand, that we had our obligations to Poland which we were bound to honour. The reply should point out that Herr Hitler's letter did not explain what basis of settlement of the Polish question he had in mind. We, for our part, hoped that the basis of settlement which he contemplated would be reasonable. If a solution could be arrived at which had regard to Poland's vital interests, and was subject to an international guarantee, it would be one which we could recommend to Poland. For the rest, we might indicate that we were prepared to give certain help in regard to the minority question; but that it was difficult for us to say much in regard to other questions until we had more precise information.

The Foreign Secretary said that he had seen the French and Polish Ambassadors on the previous day. He had given them the gist of Herr Hitler's letter and of our proposed draft reply. M. Corbin had said that the French had also received a communication from Herr Hitler, but in somewhat different terms. Thus, the references to the British Empire were replaced by references to the Western Front and to Alsace-Lorraine. The Polish Ambassador had

expressed no special views. The French had been willing to suggest to the Polish Government that they should make a direct approach to Berlin in regard to an exchange of populations. He understood that Sir Neville Henderson thought that this would be useful.

Sir Neville Henderson then replied to questions put to him by various members of the Cabinet. Asked whether he considered that Herr Hitler still entertained any doubts on the point that, if he invaded Poland, Great Britain would make war upon Germany, Sir Neville replied that no reasonable person could now have any doubt on the subject. He thought that in making the proposals in his letter, Herr Hitler probably had in mind; first, the Prime Minister's letter; and secondly, the almost unanimous vote in the House of Commons. Since that morning he was probably also influenced by the signature of the ~~Anglo~~-Polish Treaty. He thought however that we must not rule out altogether the possibility that Herr Hitler might still hope that he could detach us from the Poles and get us to dishonour our obligations.

Asked whether he thought that the letter represented an attempt to find a way out, Sir Neville said that he thought that the letter might have been written partly with a view to providing useful material for propaganda. Thus, it might enable Herr Hitler to say that he had made a magnificent offer to this country, which had been rejected. The German propaganda in regard to encirclement, which had been running with great effect for some three or four months, was not now, since the conclusion of the Russo-German alliance, as convincing as it had been and he might feel the need of propaganda on other lines. Another

possibility was that Herr Hitler had never intended to push matter beyond the limits of bluff, and that he thought it was now time to look for a solution of the difficulty without war.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the points made in the letter had, he thought, been in Herr Hitler's mind continuously, and had made their appearance at intervals. The basic idea was that if Britain would leave Herr Hitler alone in his sphere, (Eastern Europe), he would leave us alone. His idea might be that he was now getting near war, and that if war came, his people would say that it was his own fault, and that accordingly he ought to state his points more clearly than ever before. If the offer was rejected no doubt it would be represented for propaganda purposes as having been a magnificent offer. All the time there might be at the back of his mind the idea that he might be able to persuade us to accept some solution of the Danzig and Corridor questions and that he would thus get his own way without war.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON agreed. Herr Hitler had said to him at Berchtesgaden that he would prefer to get his way without war.

In reply to another question the Ambassador suggested that, however little faith one might have in Herr Hitler's promises, one might at least test them out.

Asked what was the least which Herr Hitler would accept without going to war, Sir Neville Henderson said that Herr Hitler would claim that Danzig should be incorporated in East Prussia. He would also

wish to include the whole of the Corridor in Germany, but he might, perhaps, be content with extra-territorial roads. At the present time, however, the most pressing question was the minority question; this took precedence over Danzig and the Corridor, the solution of which might perhaps be postponed. Herr Hitler claimed that there were $1\frac{1}{2}$ million Germans in Poland. The Poles said there were a million Poles in Germany, but Herr Hitler said there were 600,000.

Asked as to the allegations regarding the persecution of the German minority, Sir Neville Henderson thought that 80% of the reports now published were an exaggeration, but that the remaining 20% were true. The reports of minority troubles could for a time be kept out of the papers, but he doubted whether, without some drastic change, the question could ever be permanently settled. As an example of the exaggeration of minority questions, Herr Hitler said that there were 100,000 persons of German race, but of Polish nationality, who were now refugees in Germany. The Polish Ambassador said there were not more than 17,000 refugees.

Asked what advice the German General Staff had given Herr Hitler, Sir Neville Henderson said that Herr Hitler's military advisers would no doubt favour war with Poland alone. If however it was clear that Germany would thereby be involved in a general war, he thought that the advice of the German Generals would be divided. He agreed that the pact with Russia was no doubt partly due to the influence of the Army, whose historic policy was an alliance between Germany and Russia, and that the military probably enjoyed more influence with Herr Hitler than any other section of German opinion.

As regards the Russo-German alliance Sir Nevile doubted whether this had gone very far at the moment. For example he doubted whether there was any agreement to partition Poland. At the same time it seemed likely that there was some big quid pro quo which did not form part of the published agreement.

Sir Nevile Henderson mentioned that, when Herr Hitler had said to him that if general war broke out Japan would be the only gainer, he was probably influenced by the fact that just before his interview the Japanese Ambassador had protested strongly against the Russo-German alliance. This had irritated Herr Hitler, who was a man of moods, and had caused him to make this statement. He thought that there was a good deal of indignation among the German people against the Russo-German alliance. His own butler (a German) had said to him with indignation that Germany had made an agreement with her one enemy. Combined with this, however, there was a general sense of relief that the danger of attack from the Russian Air Force was eliminated. There was nothing in Berlin today to indicate the likelihood of war. He did not think, however, that if war broke out Herr Hitler would experience any particular difficulty with his own people, at any rate for some time. Nor did he think that the Russo-German alliance would be likely to cause Herr Hitler difficulty, since the German people were so easily led.

A question was then asked as to what was the point at which Herr Hitler would fight, if his demands were not acceded to.

Sir Nevile Henderson replied that he thought that all along Herr Hitler had intended to start a war of nerves, and to see how much he could get without fighting.

At the same time, if we got into a position in which neither side could give way, war would result. It was, of course, particularly difficult for Dictators to give way.

Reference was made to the passage in Sir Neville Henderson's telegram No. 459 which reported Herr Hitler as saying that he had no interest in making Great Britain break her word to Poland, and had no wish to be small-minded in any settlement with Poland.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON said that there was an interesting point about this statement. He had no recollection of Herr Hitler having used these precise words. Subsequent to the interview, Herr Schmidt, the interpreter, who had been present had come to him and had given him various messages from Herr von Ribbentrop, and had specifically drawn his attention to the fact that Herr Hitler had used these words. He thought that it might well be the case that these words were an addition to what had actually been said, and in effect formed a message from Herr von Ribbentrop.

It was agreed that this gave added significance to these words.

Reference was also made to the statement of Herr Hitler, reported in telegram No. 462, that whatever happened now, the fate of Poland would be settled between Germany and Russia. It was explained that this statement had not been made as indicating any

intention on the part of Germany and Russia to partition Poland, but rather as a general indication that Germany was now so powerful that she could do what she wished.

Asked whether it would be possible for Herr Hitler and Colonel Beck to negotiate amicably at the present time, SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON said he thought that this was so, though much depended on the atmosphere. He had told the Polish Ambassador in Germany to see Field Marshal Goering, and to tell him that Herr von Ribbentrop had ruined the last negotiations between Poland and Germany. He gathered that Herr von Ribbentrop had attempted on that occasion to impose a diktat. He hoped that matters would be so arranged that, if negotiations started between Germany and Poland, there would be no attempt at a German diktat. Sir Neville thought that the real value of our guarantee to Poland was to enable Poland to come to a negotiated settlement with Germany.

There had been a good deal of talk of the demilitarisation of Danzig. Herr Hitler had spoken of Danzig as a Free City, but Sir Neville did not know what this was intended to convey. It was true that Herr Hitler had said that he would not repeat the offer which he had made in March, but Sir Neville thought that if something was done about the minority question Herr Hitler might still be persuaded to accept the offer which he had then made

in regard to Danzig and the Corridor. The minority question was no new one, but propaganda in regard to it had been shut down as the result of the arrangement made between Marshal Pilsudski and Herr Hitler in 1934.

In reply to another question, Sir Neville Henderson said that the general position was quite different from last year, when Herr Hitler had entertained a great hatred of Dr. Benes and refused to meet him. He was quite well disposed towards Colonel Beck and M. Lipski.

Reference was made to the Commissions which had been established in Czechoslovakia after the Munich settlement, and to the very stiff attitude which the German Government representatives had adopted on those Commissions. Asked whether, if similar Commissions were now to be established to deal with German-Polish questions, the German attitude was likely to stiffen again, Sir Neville Henderson said that there could be no guarantee that this would not happen.

Reference was then made to the difficulty of opening direct negotiations between Poland and Germany, and to the difficult position which any Polish negotiator sent to Germany would occupy.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON said that the Polish Ambassador in Berlin had seen no representative of the German Government for the last four months until he had seen Field Marshal Goering quite recently. He had often advised him to see representatives of the German Government, but M. Lipski

had replied that he had nothing to say. He thought that the exchange of populations would be a favourable point on which to open negotiations.

Sir Neville Henderson was asked whether he thought that the opening of direct negotiations between Poland and Germany would constitute the gesture, referred to in telegram No. 459, which might avoid war.

He replied that Herr Hitler's argument was that Britain had given a blank cheque to Poland and that we had encouraged her to adopt a thoroughly unreasonable attitude. If he was in a position to say that we could arrange that the Polish Government would enter into direct negotiations with Herr Hitler, it might well make a considerable difference.

In reply to a question as to what attitude the Polish Government would take towards an exchange of populations, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that he had put this point to the Polish Ambassador, who had not reacted unfavourably to it. He had given the impression that he would be glad to find a way out of the present difficulties, but doubted whether one could be found.

General agreement was expressed with the view that the minority question formed a good basis on which to start negotiations. It was pointed out that in negotiating an exchange of populations, each country could treat on level terms with the other, and that there need be no question of one country giving way to the other.

In further discussion it was suggested that it would be desirable in the reply to Herr Hitler to take advantage of the phrase to which Herr Schmidt had drawn particular attention, namely, that Herr Hitler had no interest in making Britain break her word, and had no wish to be small-minded in any settlement with Poland.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON agreed, and said that he had referred to this phrase in a note which he had sent to Herr von Ribbentrop that afternoon.

It was also pointed out that disarmament was referred to in more definite terms in Herr Hitler's letter than on previous occasions.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON said that Herr Hitler had mentioned that he had read the Prime Minister's and Foreign Secretary's recent speeches.

At this stage the draft reply to Herr Hitler's letter was handed round to the Cabinet, and was read out by the Prime Minister.

THE PRIME MINISTER invited suggestions as to the draft. He said that he would be very glad to know what impression it made on those of his colleagues who, unlike himself, came to it fresh. In discussion the following suggestions were made.

It was suggested that the tone of the opening paragraphs was somewhat too deferential, and appeared to treat Herr Hitler's suggestions with somewhat too much respect. Generally, it was thought that the earlier part of the draft might be stiffened up. A letter which was firm yet moderate in tone might have great effect on German public opinion.

It was also suggested that more prominence should be given in the earlier part of the draft to our undertaking to Poland. Again, it was thought that the draft did not make enough of the need for direct negotiation on the minority question and proposed exchange of populations, between Poland and Germany.

In reply to this the FOREIGN SECRETARY said that this had been done deliberately, as in Sir Neville Henderson's view if this proposal was to have any chance of acceptance it should come from the Polish Government. The Cabinet were informed that acting with the French, we had endeavoured in the course of the day to persuade the French to induce them to make a move in this direction.

The question was raised whether it was intended to consult the Poles before despatching our reply. It was felt that this would lead to delay, and might put the Poles in a difficult position. Colonel Beck might be unwilling to give a definite answer. It was generally felt that we must take the responsibility for what was said in the letter, although this would place limits on what we could say.

Two alterations to the order of paragraphs in the letter were suggested. The first was that paragraph 3 suitably amended should be brought down after the end of paragraph 5. The other was that paragraph 6 broke the continuity of the argument represented by paragraphs 4, 5 and 7, and that it should come later on, perhaps after paragraph 9.

Reference was also made to the statement in paragraph 3 of the draft letter that His Majesty's Government would be prepared to accept the proposals outlined in the Fuehrer's offer, possibly with some additions, as a basis of negotiation. It was pointed out that one of these proposals concerned Herr Hitler's Colonial demands and that it was undesirable to use language which might be interpreted as implying that we accepted such a demand as a basis for negotiation. It was suggested that the words "subject for discussion" might be substituted for the words "basis for negotiation", and perhaps some less definite word for "accepted".

It was also suggested that it would be desirable to modify the draft in such a way as to suggest that we appreciated the urgency of reaching a settlement of some, at least, of the problems involved, in order to lessen the existing state of tension.

It was also suggested that it was undesirable to use the phrase "general lines of an offer" in paragraph 2.

Reference was made to the language of paragraph 8, dealing with minorities. It was thought that this paragraph, in particular the concluding section, referred to minority problems in terms of too great mutuality, and that this was likely to arouse resentment on the part of Herr Hitler. The view was also expressed that it was undesirable to give the impression that we were lecturing Poland in this matter.

THE PRIME MINISTER expressed his gratitude to his colleagues for their criticisms.

It was agreed that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the

Chancellor of the Exchequer should be invited to prepare a revised draft, which would be considered by the Cabinet at a meeting to be held at 10.30 a.m.* on Sunday, 27th August. It was agreed that copies of the revised draft should be available to the members of the Cabinet at 10.0 a.m.* in the Treasury Board Room.

Attitude of
the Dominions.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS gave an account of the attitude of the Dominions and their High Commissioners. The Prime Minister of Australia and the Acting Prime Minister of New Zealand had both indicated their support of the attitude of His Majesty's Government. Mr. MacKenzie King had said that he could make no public statement until Parliament reassembled, but that if we were involved in war, his Cabinet is unanimous in its decision to fight. As regards South Africa, General Smuts said that he thought that circumstances would be too strong for General Hertzog, and that he would have to summon Parliament, in which case he (General Smuts) would press for a definite decision between belligerency or neutrality and hoped to be able to carry his colleagues with him in deciding for belligerency.

The Secretary of State said that in the course of the day he had seen the High Commissioners, who, subject to one or two minor points, had taken the view that notwithstanding certain impertinences in Herr Hitler's note we should send a reply to it in as generous terms as possible.

* The time of the Cabinet Meeting was subsequently postponed until 3.0 p.m.

Mr. te Water had thought that his Government would favour making an effort to secure a comprehensive settlement.

The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs then read out a telegram which the Union High Commissioner had just received from General Hertzog, and had shown to him.

Broadly, the gist of the attitude of the High Commissioners was that we should make use of Herr Hitler's letter to endeavour to secure a discussion of what we should regard as a reasonable settlement all round. All the High Commissioners were in agreement with this view, and had asked that the Prime Minister should be informed of what they had said. Mr. Massey had, however, made it clear that he was only expressing his personal views.

The Cabinet took note of this statement.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS also referred to a proposal by Mr. MacKenzie King that H.M. the KING should be invited to send a letter to Herr Hitler. This suggestion met with no favour.

DEFENCE
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Suggested
introduction
of the
Precautionary
Stage.

2. Discussion took place in regard to a number of defence measures.

The Cabinet were informed of a suggestion that it might be desirable to introduce the Precautionary Stage, subject to a proviso that any measures which could be regarded as of a provocative character should not be sanctioned, and that no undue publicity should be given to any further steps taken.

The view generally expressed was that Departments had already, subject to perhaps a few exceptions, given effect to the steps which they regarded as necessary, in present circumstances, and that it was undesirable to put the Precautionary Stage into operation at this juncture.

It was true that the War Book had been drawn up on the assumption that effect could be more easily given to pre-arranged war measures if the Precautionary Stage were formally instituted, since this provided the signal for the wholesale institution of a number of measures simultaneously. At the same time, the War Book enjoyed the necessary elasticity to permit these measures being introduced piece-meal if necessary, although this suffered from the disadvantage of being administratively more difficult and inconvenient than if the measures were introduced wholesale by the declaration of the Precautionary Stage.

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The general conclusion reached was that at this juncture, notwithstanding the administrative advantages of instituting the Precautionary Stage, it was undesirable, on

general grounds, to take this step.

THE MINISTER FOR CO-ORDINATION OF DEFENCE referred to an important Report which had been prepared by the Chiefs of Staff (C.O.S. 966) dealing with the preparation of a Declaration of War. The main points which emerged from this Report were that if an ultimatum was not to be issued until all essential war preparations had been completed, the earliest date for the ultimatum would be Thursday, 31st August. This assumed that action was taken which enabled evacuation to start by Monday the 28th.

Army
Mobilisation.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR said that he was prepared to accept the Prime Minister's decision that the time had not come for the mobilisation of the Regular Army Reserve. He was, however, very anxious to embody the Territorial Field Army, further personnel from which were urgently required for specific duties.

In discussion, it was pointed out that this would mean the embodiment of 300,000 men.

In the course of discussion the **PRIME MINISTER** suggested that the Secretary of State for War should be authorised to call for a further 35,000 men of the Territorial Army, as volunteers, to carry out the various duties for which further personnel were immediately required.

Postal and
Telegraph
Censorship.

This course was agreed to.

It was explained that at a meeting of Ministers held on the preceding day it had been provisionally decided to put certain measures of postal and telegraph censorship into operation. Subsequent to the meeting it had been decided to

suspend action on these measures, and the question arose whether they should now be proceeded with. In the course of discussion it was pointed out that the imposition of postal and telegraph censorship meant inter alia a complete stoppage of all telephone messages from this country to the Continent, and it was agreed that this measure should be held over for consideration on the ensuing day.

**Naval
Control of
Movements
of Shipping.**

Reference was also made to the decision reached at the meeting of the Defence Preparedness Committee on the previous day, authorising the Admiralty to adopt Naval control of all British merchant shipping. Subsequent to the meeting it had been decided to postpone action on this decision.

It was explained that this measure involved a number of steps which would receive considerable publicity. Nevertheless, importance was attached to carrying out this measure at an early date.

The Cabinet agreed that Naval control of the movements of shipping should be adopted forthwith.

The Cabinet agreed:-

- (1) Not to authorise the introduction of the Precautionary Stage.
- (2) To authorise the Secretary of State for War to call up a further 35,000 men of the Territorial Field Army as volunteers, but not to authorise the mobilisation of the Regular Army Reserve.
- (3) To postpone till the ensuing day a decision whether to impose postal and telegraph censorship.
- (4) To authorise the immediate introduction of Naval control of movements of shipping.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.,

27th August, 1939.